

**ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME
DIVISION OF COMMERCIAL FISHERIES
NEWS RELEASE**



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2019 NORTON SOUND SALMON SEASON SUMMARY

COMMERCIAL SALMON FISHERY

Well above average runs of chum, pink, sockeye and coho salmon highlighted the 2019 fishery. The coho salmon commercial harvest was the fourth highest in history and was a top 5 harvest for the third year in a row. The chum salmon commercial harvest was the third highest in the last 35 years. The sockeye salmon commercial harvest, although a small portion of the overall harvest, was the highest in history at nearly 7,000 fish. The pink salmon run was one of the greatest runs for an odd-numbered year and pink salmon escapements were records at several salmon counting projects. However, there was little interest from the buyer in purchasing pink salmon. No commercial fishing targeting king salmon was allowed but the run was much better than expected and the harvest of nearly 1,400 fish was the highest in 20 years. This summary should be considered preliminary and will be updated in subsequent reports.

Table 1 lists the Norton Sound salmon current year and historical commercial harvests relative to the recent 5-year (2014–2018) and 10-year (2009–2018) averages. The combined commercial harvest of all salmon species was 381,124 fish. There were 145 commercial permits fished in 2019, the second highest total since 1993. The 2019 fishery value to the fishers of \$2,073,586 was the third year in a row that the value exceeded two million dollars and was the ninth year in the last ten years that the value exceeded one million dollars. Before 2010, the last time the value of the fishery exceeded one million dollars was in the 1980s.

The coho salmon catch of 139,820 fish (Table 2) was 25% higher than the recent 10-year average but only 85% of the recent 5-year average because 3 of the top 5 record catches occurred in the previous 5 years (Table 3). The chum salmon catch of 157,035 fish was 11% higher than the recent 5-year average and 36% higher than the recent 10-year average.

Only one salmon buyer operated in Norton Sound during the 2019 season. The Unalakleet fish plant operated by Norton Sound Seafood Products (NSSP) was the base of commercial salmon fisheries operations. Salmon were both delivered to the Unalakleet dock and tendered from all other subdistricts, except from the Nome Subdistrict. The Nome Subdistrict catch was processed at the NSSP plant in Nome and some Golovin and Elim catches were also processed in Nome. The floating processor *Pavlof* was also anchored offshore of Elim processing and freezing salmon delivered by tenders.

Prices paid per pound were \$3.00 for king salmon, \$1.39 for sockeye salmon, \$1.57 for coho salmon, \$0.13 for pink salmon, and \$.50 for chum salmon. Both chum salmon and pink salmon saw big declines in price compared to last year when chum salmon was \$0.80/lb. and pink salmon was \$0.25/lb.

SUBSISTENCE SALMON FISHERY

Subsistence salmon fishers in the Port Clarence District and Subdistricts 1–3 (Nome, Golovin, and Elim) were required to possess a subsistence permit for each household that fished in these locations. The permits identify the type of gear used, and the bag limit, that is specific to each body of water. In addition, the permit contains a catch calendar where the permit holder records the catch of each species of fish for each day fished. If the subsistence fishers have filled their harvest limit in one river they can fish in another river.

The only places where there are limits on subsistence salmon harvest are in the Nome Subdistrict, and Pilgrim River and Salmon Lake in the Port Clarence District. Salmon limits have been in place in Nome Subdistrict since 1985 but have been removed for most rivers with the improving chum salmon runs in recent years. Subsistence permits are important to management because they identify users and harvests, but the actual catch information cannot be compiled in most circumstances until well after the season when the permits are returned. In southern Norton Sound, villages are surveyed to estimate the subsistence harvest and likewise this information is not available until well after the season.

SEASON SUMMARY BY SUBDISTRICT

Nome - Subdistrict 1

This was the seventh consecutive season that commercial fishing was allowed since the mid-90s. There were 7 permit holders that fished in 2019, which was the same as last two seasons. The coho salmon commercial harvest of 7,788 fish was the second highest on record trailing last year's record catch of 9,080 fish. The sockeye salmon commercial harvest of 742 was a record. The chum salmon commercial harvest of 14,546 was the third highest in history.

In recent years, subsistence fishing time has been liberalized in the Nome Subdistrict by increasing marine gillnet fishing time from three days a week to five days a week west of Cape Nome and seven days a week east of Cape Nome. Also, freshwater gillnet fishing time has been increased from two 48-hour fishing periods a week to five days a week.

For over 40 years subsistence salmon permits have been required for the Nome Subdistrict. During the 2019 season, 558 permits were issued which is the third highest on record.

Observations during the season indicated that the Nome River was once again the river that had the most fishing effort. Most salmon counting projects in Subdistrict 1 had above average chum salmon escapement counts and well above average pink salmon escapement counts. During the limited time counted because of high water this year, the coho salmon escapement counts were above average.

Golovin - Subdistrict 2

The season began with four 24-hour fishing periods in June and then two 48-hour fishing periods a week in July and continuing into August. During coho salmon season only two permit holders usually fished as other permit holders moved to Unalakleet to fish.

The chum salmon commercial harvest of 25,575 fish was the highest harvest since fishing resumed in 2008. Coho salmon commercial harvest was above average and the harvest of 2,424 fish was the tenth highest on record.

The Fish River tower was in its sixth year of operation and was only able to count for six days this year because of high water obscuring fish passage. The first day of counts was on July 20, near the historical midpoint of the pink salmon run, and the historical third quarter-point of the chum salmon run. However, that short duration of counting did confirm the huge pink salmon run with two days having record counts of over 200,000 pink salmon daily. Historically, the coho salmon run has been at less than 10% of the overall passage during the July counting period this year, but in six days of counting the passage through July 25 was 3,144 coho salmon and was a record cumulative count for that date. Also, the last day of counting on July 25 had a one-day record of 2,070 coho salmon passing the tower. The aerial survey escapement goal range for Niukluk River and Ophir Creek is 750-1,600 coho salmon but the aerial survey was not completed this year because of poor viewing conditions (Table 4).

Elim - Subdistrict 3

The Elim Subdistrict commercial fishing schedule was the nearly the same as the Golovin Subdistrict but there was less fishing time at the start of the season.

The pink salmon run was well above average but there were no directed pink salmon fishing periods. The chum salmon run was average to above average but the commercial harvest of 13,292 fish was slightly below average. Weather was a factor in fishing time this year and there was no fishing for one week during chum salmon season because of high surf conditions. The coho salmon commercial harvest was within 5% of the recent 10-year average, but nearly one third off the recent 5-year average because the previous five years have had the five highest coho salmon harvests on record.

The Kwiniuk River tower is the longest running escapement project in Norton Sound, which began in 1965. This year because of high water, counting began two weeks later than normal, was suspended in early August for one week, and the project was pulled a week early in September. No adjustment to the escapement counts were made for the late start or when counting was suspended. Escapement counts were 111 king salmon, 17,790 chum salmon, 669,815 pink salmon, 15 sockeye salmon, and 5,630 coho salmon. King salmon passage was below the escapement goal of 250 fish for the fourth year in a row, but the chum salmon passage was within the escapement goal range of 9,100-32,600 fish. Pink salmon escapement was a record for an odd-numbered year. The escapement goal for coho salmon is an aerial survey goal of 650-1,300 fish and was likely met based on the tower count, but no survey was flown because of poor viewing conditions.

Norton Bay - Subdistrict 4

The Norton Bay Subdistrict commercial fishing schedule was the same as the Elim Subdistrict, but fishing was very poor and after July only one permit holder fished one time in August.

The commercial salmon harvest of 3,614 fish was the second lowest since fishing resumed in 2008. In the last 12 years of fishing the chum salmon harvest of 1,982 fish was the second lowest and the coho salmon harvest of 199 fish was lowest. The sockeye salmon harvest of 106 fish was the only species that was above the recent 10-year average.

A new counting tower on the Ungalik River was operated by Norton Sound Economic Development Corporation (NSEDC) this year. High water resulted in a late start to counting but the pink count was still nearly 2 million fish. The Inglutalik River tower also operated by NSEDC had escapement counts of 171 king salmon, 24,727 chum salmon, 208,956 pink salmon and 909 coho salmon. At Inglutalik River counting started late and was suspended early and all counts were below average for the 9-year history of the project.

Shaktoolik and Unalakleet - Subdistricts 5 and 6

Both the Shaktoolik and Unalakleet Subdistricts share a common commercial fishing boundary and management actions typically encompass both subdistricts because salmon tend to intermingle and the harvest in one subdistrict affects the movement of fish in the adjacent subdistrict. Commercial fishing is typically only allowed after king salmon have been observed in increasing numbers in

subsistence fishing nets and the department is confident the midpoint of the king salmon escapement goal range of 1,200-2,600 fish will be reached at the North River counting tower. If the department does not project that the king salmon escapement goal range will be met and has taken restrictions in the subsistence fishery, then no commercial salmon gillnet fishing periods are allowed until after June 30.

The department forecast for 2019 was for a below average run of king salmon and that restrictions on subsistence fishing would be required to reach enough escapement. The marine waters of southern Norton Sound from Bald Head (near Elim) south to Wood Point (near St. Michael), and, except for the Koyuk River, all fresh waters from Bald Head to Black Point were closed to subsistence salmon fishing on June 15. After June 15, Subdistrict 4 had a subsistence fishing schedule and in Subdistricts 5 and 6 one 36-hour fishing period with gillnets restricted to 6 inches or smaller mesh size was allowed each week in the marine waters. Beginning July 1, fishing time was increased to two 36-hour periods per week. In fresh waters, the subsistence fishing schedule went in effect for Subdistricts 5 and 6 on July 1 and the restriction on the retention of king salmon when caught in a beach seine, cast net or dip net was removed. On July 15, all waters were opened to 7 days per week fishing.

Commercial fishing targeting chum salmon began on July 1 with a 48-hour fishing period and all fishing periods throughout the season were concurrent for both subdistricts. Chum salmon escapement counts, and chum salmon commercial harvest numbers allowed for two 48-hour fishing periods per week in July with extensions if weather affected fishing effort. In early August, flooding prevented almost all escapement counting projects from operating and the department managed based on comparing historical commercial catches during the same time period in prior years. Catches were above average, and the buyer wanted to stay with two 48-hour fishing periods per week. The department increased fishing time in September but weather prevented most permit holders from fishing and the department extended the season for six days to allow for additional opportunity to harvest coho salmon.

Shaktoolik Subdistrict commercial catch for chum salmon was the third highest on record with 42,827 fish caught and Unalakleet Subdistrict commercial catch for chum salmon was the fifth highest on record with 58,813 fish caught (Table 2). Coho salmon commercial harvest in Shaktoolik was fourth highest with 35,381 fish caught and seventh highest in Unalakleet with 82,582 fish caught. The sockeye salmon harvest, although an incidental catch, was the highest on record in both subdistricts with 1,995 fish caught in Shaktoolik and 3,311 fish caught in Unalakleet (Table 2).

Observations during the season indicated that the Unalakleet River was once again the river that had the most fishing effort in Subdistricts 5 and 6, the Unalakleet and Shaktoolik Subdistricts. Unalakleet River weir and Shaktoolik River tower both had the highest king salmon escapement count on record and chum salmon and pink salmon escapements were above average. Because of high water there was limited operations during the coho salmon run.

Port Clarence District

Port Clarence District is the salmon district immediately to the northwest of Norton Sound and it has a larger run of sockeye salmon than Norton Sound. This year the sockeye salmon run was well above average but there was no buyer interest for a commercial fishery.

Sockeye salmon return to Salmon Lake via Pilgrim River which is easily accessible by a road from Nome. Permits have been required for subsistence salmon fishing in Pilgrim River since 1964 and 473 permits were issued this season which was the fourth highest on record. Each year the subsistence catch limit starts at 25 sockeye salmon and the department waived the limit early in the season when the lower end of the escapement goal range was projected to be exceeded. In the previous 4 years when the limit was waived subsistence sockeye salmon harvests have ranged from 9,073 to 12,148 fish. The majority of the subsistence harvest of sockeye salmon in Pilgrim River has been by seine.

The Pilgrim River weir project began operations in 2003 and this year's count of 367,245 pink salmon was a record, greatly exceeding the previous record of 92,641 pink salmon counted in 2008. Although pink salmon have been the second highest salmon species harvested after sockeye salmon, the harvests have only ranged from 10 to 526 fish since 2003. The sockeye salmon count was 26,754 fish and should be considered a partial count because high water delayed weir operations until July 11. In the past three years, an average of 30% of sockeye salmon runs were through the weir by that date as opposed to only 1% of the pink salmon run.

ESCAPEMENT

Table 4 summarizes escapement assessments for the major index river systems of the Norton Sound and Port Clarence Districts in 2019. These assessments were often qualitative and relative to historical escapement sizes. One of two king salmon escapement goals was not reached this year. Although high water prevented some salmon runs from being fully counted all escapement goal ranges for salmon other than king salmon were likely reached and many escapement goal ranges were exceeded.

Department salmon counting projects in Norton Sound in 2019 included a counting tower on the Kwiniuk River and weirs on the Bonanza River, Nome River, and Solomon River. Norton Sound Economic Development Corporation (NSEDC) assists with staffing at the Bonanza River, Kwiniuk River, and Nome River projects.

Eight additional salmon counting projects were also operated in the management area this season. The Eldorado River and Pilgrim River had weir projects and the Fish, Inglutalik, North, Shaktoolik and Ungalik rivers had counting towers which were set up and operated by NSEDC. A cooperative weir project at Snake River is operated by the department during the chum salmon run and NSEDC during the coho salmon run. Also, a cooperative weir project was operated on the Unalakleet River by the department with assistance from NSEDC and Native Village of Unalakleet. Funding for the Unalakleet River weir project was provided by United States Fish & Wildlife Service – Office of Subsistence Management.

High water prevented aerial surveys during the beginning of the season, and flooding in August and September prevented coho salmon surveys. As usual, the Nome Subdistrict streams received the most intensive assessment efforts because salmon stocks local to the Nome area are easily accessed by the road system and are exposed to intensive subsistence and sport fishing pressure.

Table 1.—Norton Sound salmon catch and dollar value, 1961-2019.

Year	Total catch	Number of permits	Gross value of catch to permit holders
1961	101,711	a	a
1962	232,431	a	\$105,800
1963	224,378	a	\$104,000
1964	164,671	a	\$51,000
1965	39,203	a	\$21,483
1966	100,345	a	\$68,000
1967	74,818	a	\$44,038
1968	124,409	a	\$63,700
1969	178,972	a	\$95,297
1970	178,218	a	\$99,019
1971	141,977	a	\$101,000
1972	149,494	a	\$102,225
1973	176,797	a	\$308,740
1974	315,829	a	\$437,127
1975	251,861	a	\$413,255
1976	193,063	a	\$285,283
1977	257,325	164	\$546,010
1978	531,948	176	\$907,330
1979	350,401	175	\$878,792
1980	444,337	159	\$572,125
1981	441,734	167	\$761,658
1982	511,208	164	\$1,069,723
1983	456,420	170	\$946,232
1984	342,159	141	\$738,064
1985	180,200	155	\$818,477
1986	230,400	163	\$546,452
1987	136,283	164	\$517,894
1988	225,132	152	\$760,641
1989	92,811	110	\$319,489
1990	131,665	128	\$474,064
1991	156,789	126	\$413,479
1992	199,933	110	\$448,395
1993	263,670	153	\$368,723
1994	1,108,184	119	\$863,060
1995	181,393	105	\$356,164
1996	571,241	86	\$340,347
1997	79,141	102	\$363,908
1998	641,396	82	\$358,982
1999	23,051	60	\$76,860
2000	217,873	79	\$149,907
2001	30,849	51	\$56,921
2002	2,365	12	\$2,941
2003	20,653	30	\$64,473
2004	48,381	36	\$122,506
2005	89,669	40	\$296,154

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Year	Total catch	Number of permits	Gross value of catch to permit holders
2006	140,873	61	\$389,707
2007	152,357	71	\$572,195
2008	221,101	91	\$759,451
2009	138,737	88	\$722,167
2010	211,622	115	\$1,220,487
2011	177,167	123	\$1,269,730
2012	305,657	123	\$758,908
2013	181,247	124	\$1,183,236
2014	403,715	128	\$1,915,749
2015	369,720	128	\$1,940,408
2016	366,236	141	\$1,237,229
2017	378,561	139	\$2,788,316
2018	543,714	149	\$4,001,400
2019	381,124	145	\$2,073,586
5-year avg. ^b	412,389	137	\$2,376,620
10-year avg. ^c	307,638	126	\$1,703,763

^a Information not available.

^b 2014-2018.

^c 2009-2018.

Table 2.—Norton Sound commercial salmon harvest summary by subdistrict, 2019.

		Subdistricts						Total
		1	2	3	4	5	6	
Number of permit holders		7	18	27	12	36	77	145 ^a
King	Number	20	33	87	7	318	906	1,371
	Weight (lbs)	222	354	794	106	3,185	10,131	14,792
Sockeye	Number	742	122	693	106	1,995	3,311	6,969
	Weight (lbs)	4,391	850	3,884	642	12,155	19,937	41,859
Coho	Number	7,788	2,424	11,446	199	35,381	82,582	139,820
	Weight (lbs)	49,101	15,619	73,583	1,368	226,282	533,596	899,549
Pink	Number	4,798	7,356	14,488	1,320	19,015	28,952	75,929
	Weight (lbs)	16,748	26,343	43,371	4,512	67,156	103,110	261,240
Chum	Number	14,546	25,575	13,292	1,982	42,827	58,813	157,035
	Weight (lbs)	95,638	181,272	87,548	13,387	282,324	397,506	1,057,675
Total ^b	Number	27,894	35,510	40,006	3,614	99,536	174,564	381,124
	Weight (lbs)	166,100	224,438	209,180	20,015	591,102	1,064,280	2,275,115

^a Total number of permit holders is not the sum of permit holders in each subdistrict because some permit holders fished in more than one subdistrict.

^b Total does not include 167 kings, 187 sockeyes, 77 cohos, 608 pinks and 534 chums retained for personal use.

Table 3. –Norton Sound salmon catch, 1961-2019.

Year	King	Sockeye	Coho	Pink	Chum	Total
1961	5,300	35	13,807	34,237	48,332	101,711
1962	7,286	18	9,156	33,187	182,784	232,431
1963	6,613	71	16,765	46,180	154,749	224,378
1964	2,018	126	98	13,567	148,862	164,671
1965	128	30	2,030	220	36,795	39,203
1966	1,553	14	5,755	12,778	80,245	100,345
1967	1,804	0	2,379	28,879	41,756	74,818
1968	1,045	0	6,885	71,179	45,300	124,409
1969	2,392	0	6,836	86,949	82,795	178,972
1970	1,853	0	4,423	64,908	107,034	178,218
1971	2,593	0	3,127	4,895	131,362	141,977
1972	2,938	0	454	45,182	100,920	149,494
1973	1,918	0	9,282	46,499	119,098	176,797
1974	2,951	0	2,092	148,519	162,267	315,829
1975	2,393	2	4,593	32,388	212,485	251,861
1976	2,243	11	6,934	87,919	95,956	193,063
1977	4,500	5	3,690	48,675	200,455	257,325
1978	9,819	12	7,335	325,503	189,279	531,948
1979	10,706	57	31,438	167,411	140,789	350,401
1980	6,311	40	29,842	227,352	180,792	444,337
1981	7,929	56	31,562	232,479	169,708	441,734
1982	5,892	10	91,690	230,281	183,335	511,208
1983	10,308	27	49,735	76,913	319,437	456,420
1984	8,455	6	67,875	119,381	146,442	342,159
1985	19,491	166	21,968	3,647	134,928	180,200
1986	6,395	233	35,600	41,260	146,912	230,400
1987	7,080	207	24,279	2,260	102,457	136,283
1988	4,096	1,252	37,214	74,604	107,966	225,132
1989	5,707	265	44,091	123	42,625	92,811
1990	8,895	434	56,712	501	65,123	131,665
1991	6,068	203	63,647	0	86,871	156,789
1992	4,541	296	105,418	6,284	83,394	199,933
1993	8,972	279	43,283	157,574	53,562	263,670
1994	5,285	80	102,140	982,389	18,290	1,108,184
1995	8,860	128	47,863	81,664	42,898	181,393
1996	4,984	1	68,206	487,441	10,609	571,241
1997	12,573	161	32,284	20	34,103	79,141
1998	7,429	7	29,623	588,013	16,324	641,396
1999	2,508	0	12,662	0	7,881	23,051
2000	752	14	44,409	166,548	6,150	217,873
2001	213	44	19,492	0	11,100	30,849
2002	5	1	1,759	0	600	2,365
2003	12	21	17,060	0	3,560	20,653
2004	22	47	42,016	0	6,296	48,381
2005	151	12	85,523	0	3,983	89,669

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Year	King	Sockeye	Coho	Pink	Chum	Total
2006	20	3	130,808	0	10,042	140,873
2007	19	2	126,136	3,769	22,431	152,357
2008	83	60	120,309	75,525	25,124	221,101
2009	84	126	87,041	17,364	34,122	138,737
2010	140	103	62,079	31,557	117,743	211,622
2011	185	369	58,917	7,141	110,555	177,167
2012	197	134	37,056	205,498	62,772	305,657
2013	151	247	53,802	8,338	118,709	181,247
2014	289	519	112,756	182,406	107,745	403,715
2015	1,288	4,119	153,928	62,888	147,497	369,720
2016	321	2,888	102,890	208,961	51,176	366,236
2017	538	2,975	191,254	20,321	163,473	378,561
2018	906	3,623	260,707	40,449	238,029	543,714
2019	1,371	6,969	139,820	75,929	157,035	381,124
5-year avg. ^a	668	2,825	164,307	103,005	141,584	412,389
10-year avg. ^b	410	1,510	112,043	78,492	115,182	307,638

^a 2014-2018^b 2009-2018

Table 4.—Salmon counts of rivers and associated salmon escapement goal ranges (SEG, BEG or OEG), Norton Sound and Port Clarence, 2019.

Stream	King salmon			Chum salmon			
	Weir/ tower count	Escapement goal range	Aerial survey count ^a	Weir/ tower count	Escapement goal range	Aerial survey count ^a	Aerial survey expansion
Salmon L.							
Grand Central R.							
Pilgrim R.	174			18,490			
Glacial L.							
Sinuk R.							
Cripple R.							
Penny R.							
Anvil Creek							
Snake R.	7			2,349	2,000 - 4,200 ^b		
Nome R.	6			3,157	1,600 - 5,300 ^b		
Flambeau R.						5,057	
Eldorado R.	15			28,207	4,400 - 14,200 ^b		
Bonanza R.	8			8,807		170	
Solomon R.	0			764			
Fish R.	0			2,070			
Boston Cr.							
Niukluk R.							
Ophir Cr.							
Kwiniuk R.	111	250		17,790	9,100 - 32,600 ^b		
Tubutulik R.					3,100 - 9,900 ^b		
Ungalik R.	27			15,129			
Inglutalik R.	171			24,727			
Shaktoolik R.	2,668			29,118			
Unalakleet R.	6,641			65,018			
Old Woman R.							
North R.	3,315	1,200-2,600		10,785			

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Stream	Coho salmon			Sockeye salmon			Pink salmon		
	Weir/ tower count	Aerial survey count ^a	Escapement goal range	Weir/ tower count	Escapement goal range	Aerial survey count ^a	Weir/ tower count	Escapement goal range	Aerial survey count ^a
Salmon L.						26,935			
Grand Central R.						8,700			180
Pilgrim R.	229			26,754	6,800-36,000		367,245		
Glacial L.					800 - 1,600	5,175			900
Sinuk R.									420,000
Cripple R.									208,080
Penny R.									315,000
Anvil Creek									
Snake R.	3,441			20			100,544		
Nome R.	1,891			242			602,195	13,000	
Flambeau R.									
Eldorado R. ^b	4			36			56,901		
Bonanza R.	153			9			167,516		45,425
Solomon R.	45			27			40,440		136,300
Fish R.	3,144			0			209,196		
Boston Cr.									
Niukluk R.			Combined						
Ophir Cr.			750-1,600						
Kwiniuk R.	5,630		650-1,300	15			669,815	8,400	
Tubutulik R.									
Ungalik R.	3,369			24			1,964,700		
Inglutalik R.	909			36			208,956		
Shaktoolik R.	5,544			165			4,179,948		
Unalakleet R.	10,749			3,356					
Old Woman R.									
North R.	1,533		550-1,100	30			2,070,267	25,000	

Note: Data not available for all streams. Sustainable escapement goal (SEG), biological escapement goal (BEG), and optimal escapement goal (OEG) are listed.

^a All aerial surveys are rated fair to good, unless otherwise noted.

^b The Alaska Board of Fisheries (BOF) also established an OEG with the same range as the SEG.